



10 Steps to Peak Performance

by David Meinz, MS, RD

Would you like to feel better, live longer and have more energy?

For most of us, this is an achievable goal. Following are 10 basic steps that will help you energize and probably lengthen your life, too.

Step 1: Eat healthy

The most important health-care decisions you will make throughout your lifetime won't take place at your physician's office or at the gym. They're made at the supermarket and the restaurant. The healthier the food you bring home and put in your mouth, the healthier you will be.

Fat. Most of us, especially those of us in North America, need to eat less fat. The average adult should eat no more than 50 grams of fat a day, or approximately 30 percent of his or her daily calories. The average person consumes about 82 grams per day.

Sodium. Limit your sodium to 2,000–3,000 milligrams per day. Be careful, though, that's not as much as you'd think. One teaspoon of salt has 2,000 milligrams of sodium.

Fibre. Make sure you get 30 grams of fibre a day. Just two slices of whole wheat bread gets you one-fifth of the way to your daily goal. The average consumption of fibre is only about 10 grams per day. To avoid potential digestive discomfort, give yourself about six months to reach your daily goal of 30 grams.

Sugar. One teaspoon of sugar equals four grams. So, if a nutrition label says a can of cola contains 39 grams of sugar, it contains nearly 10 teaspoons. While there is no official recommended intake for sugar, most of us take in too much, with Americans' sugar coming primarily from soft drinks.

Cholesterol. Consume no more than 300 milligrams of cholesterol a day. You can keep within these limits by reading the labels on the food you are buying. If you live in a country where nutrition labels are not required, check nutrition Web sites for lists of what is in the food you eat. Ask your doctor for a list of what to eat and what to avoid or for the name of a good dietitian.

Step 2: Get enough sleep

Adults around the world, especially in industrialized countries, are not getting enough sleep. If you want to operate at peak performance, you must break this

cycle.

Lack of sleep can make you irritable. It can impair your motor skills. It decreases your ability to think, to make decisions and to be creative. Lack of sleep can lead to increased stress hormones, increased blood pressure and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Step 3: Eat breakfast

We tell our children they need to eat breakfast. After all, it's good for them.

Why, then, do we assume that adults do not need adequate nutrition to be efficient during the day? Getting a healthy breakfast will help you perform, and feel, better.

Step 4: Drink more water

A healthy adult should drink at least eight, eight-ounce glasses of water each day. One of the reasons people are often tired is because they are dehydrated.

You can take all the vitamins you want, but if you're dehydrated, the vitamins aren't going to do any good. Your system needs water for optimal performance.

Step 5: Eat frequently and lightly

This is excellent advice. Your blood sugar level is what makes you feel good or not feel good.

For an average day, try this schedule: Eat a smaller breakfast, have a small snack around mid-morning, then lunch, followed by a mid-afternoon snack and, finally, dinner. You'll feel better than if you eat bigger meals two or three times a day.

Step 6: Get moving

Physical activity is absolutely essential to good health and peak performance. There's a formula to follow for efficient physical activity: frequency, intensity and time.

Frequency. You should exercise three to four times a week. If you have fat to take off your body, four times. If you're trying to maintain, three times.

Intensity. This is how hard you should exercise. It's simpler than it sounds.

The first rule is merely to increase your heart rate. Just get it going faster.

The second is perspiration. Most people will sweat during exercise, so build up a sweat.

The third rule is the most important one of all – never get out of breath during your exercise session. This is a matter of efficiency.

The body requires oxygen during exercise to efficiently burn fat. So if you are getting out of breath when you exercise, slow down, catch your breath, but exercise for a longer time.

Step 7: Lose body fat

There's a difference between a quick, temporary weight-loss diet and long-term, successful body fat loss. Almost all of the diet books on the market today promote quick weight loss.

But, that could also include an unhealthy loss of muscle and water, too.

Weight loss that comes off quickly usually is regained even quicker.

The three steps to long-term successful body fat loss are: eating fewer calories, primarily by watching fat and sugar intake; making physical activity part of your permanent lifestyle; and throwing away the bathroom scale.

If you lose fat and gain muscle, the scale might not move at all.

You will think you've failed when, in fact, you're successful.

Fat takes up room, but muscle weighs a lot. Throw your scale away and buy a tape measure.

Step 8: Eat fewer simple carbohydrates

Eat fewer simple carbohydrates, and eat more complex carbohydrates. What's the difference? Simple carbohydrates are sugars, and the foods that contain them, such as soft drinks and desserts.

Complex carbohydrates include whole grain breads, cereals, brown rice, whole fruits and vegetables.

Step 9: Improve your immune system

Make your immune system as efficient as possible. The stronger your immune system, the more likely you are to avoid catching every "bug" making the rounds.

The first thing you should do is get a flu shot. The second is to exercise for four or more 30-minute sessions per week. Two simple steps, but they'll make you feel better.

Step 10: Lower your blood cholesterol level

An average, healthy adult should ideally have a total blood cholesterol level of 150 or less. The worldwide average blood cholesterol level is 165.

If you take away countries seeped in Western culture, it's even lower. The average blood cholesterol level in Asia is around 140.

Exercise and diet lower your cholesterol level. Get moving and eat a lower animal fat, higher fibre diet.

It's that simple.

Remember, perfection is not the goal. You do not have to get everything right all the time. You do not have to exercise seven days a week, or eat perfectly every day. You can eat dessert. It's how often and how much of anything you do that makes an impact on your health.

Healthy people are better able to utilize their minds, bodies and energy levels to perform at optimal levels. If you want to obtain peak performance, take care of your health — your most valuable asset.